United Nations

A/CONF.216/4

RIO+20
United Nations Conference
on Sustainable Development

Distr.: General
29 May 2012

Original: English

Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
20-22 June 2012

Item 9 of the provisional agenda*
Reports of the round tables

Background note for round tables of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development "Looking at the way forward in implementing the expected outcomes of the Conference"

I. Overview

1. The United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) has a mandate to achieve renewed political commitment for sustainable development, reflecting the urgency of pursuing sustainable development in ways that will be outlined in the outcome document. The challenges are daunting. The past few years have been marked by the impacts of and responses to the global financial and economic crisis and deepening social inequities, both of which continue to unfold. Moreover, the crisis has combined with significant volatility in food and energy prices, increased pressures on urban areas and depletion of marine resources, and the intensifying impacts of climate change have led to increased vulnerability of all people, especially the poor.

2. The Conference is a call to action for the international community. We remain guided by the seminal documents signed at Rio de Janeiro in 1992, including the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development[1] and Agenda 21,[2] and the Plan of Implementation of the World Summit on Sustainable Development,[3] agreed to at Johannesburg in 2002. What we have lacked until now is firm commitment to the action, implementation, development cooperation and partnerships that sustainable development requires in order to achieve progress on the ground on a scale that matches the seriousness of the challenges. The indication of participation by so

* A/CONF.216/1.

[1] *Report of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, Rio de Janeiro, 3-14 June 1992*, vol. I, *Resolutions Adopted by the Conference* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.93.I.8 and corrigendum), resolution 1, annex I.

[2] Ibid., annex II.

[3] *Report of the World Summit on Sustainable Development, Johannesburg, South Africa, 26 August-4 September 2002* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.03.II.A.1 and corrigendum), chap. I, resolution 2, annex.

Please recycle

many of the world's leaders at this Conference suggests that world leaders have recognized the urgency of renewing their political commitment. Now the central question we must ask ourselves is: when we go home to our capitals, what will be the impact of the outcome of the Conference on actions at all levels? How will we depart decisively from "business as usual"?

3. The Conference is expected to give us guidance on goals, tools, institutional reforms, technological cooperation and other means of implementation designed to set us firmly on a sustainable development path. It is time to reflect on how to move forward in each of these areas.

II. Sustainable development goals

4. A major outcome of the Conference is expected to be the decision to develop sustainable development goals. Such goals will help situate the Millennium Development Goals, to which the international community remains firmly committed, within a sustainable development framework. We know, however, that even if all countries should succeed in this regard, the challenges regarding poverty eradication and social development will remain. So too will the challenges for all countries of making economies sustainable, including through more sustainable patterns of consumption and production. Situating the post-2015 agenda in a sustainable development framework, including through the elaboration of sustainable development goals, would bear testimony to the elevated importance attached by Governments to sustainable development, which is indeed one of the expected legacies of the Conference.

Questions on sustainable development goals

5. The questions might include:

(a) How should the goals be defined in order for them to enjoy both universal acceptance and country ownership, relevant to national priorities?

(b) What should a short list of sustainable development goals include?

(c) How can we ensure that the post-2015 development agenda is a unified and sustainable one?

(d) How best can the international community support and assess progress towards agreed goals?

(e) How best can we ensure a process to elaborate a post-2015 development agenda that is transparent and reflective of the views of all stakeholders everywhere?

III. Green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication

6. Green economy policies are generally understood as a tool to advance sustainable development and poverty eradication, providing a range of policy options that contribute to the integration of the three pillars of sustainable development. Each country will choose its own green economy approach and policy mix, assessing national priorities and adapting measures to national institutions and

economic systems. The challenge will be to devise policies that sustain economic and social development while diminishing stresses on the environment and natural resources. The policy and incentive framework will be crucial to promote investment in development and the deployment of environmentally sound technologies.

7. Many countries are at an early stage of implementing green economy policies, though some are more advanced than others, including a number of developing countries. Much innovation is happening at the local and national levels, and networking and experience-sharing among local and national entities can also be valuable. International and regional initiatives that support capacity-building, networking, knowledge-sharing and partnerships will be invaluable and the United Nations system can play an important role in this regard. The mobilization of financial resources will also be crucial to support green economy policies and, in that regard, the international financial institutions, bilateral donors, the private sector and public-private partnerships all have important contributions to make.

Questions on green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication

8. The questions might include:

(a) What capabilities and assistance will national Governments require in designing and implementing green economy policies in accordance with their own national circumstances and priorities?

(b) In what ways can the international community best support efforts of countries in designing and implementing green economy policies?

IV. Institutional framework for sustainable development

9. The discussions on the institutional framework for sustainable development highlight the need for effective integration of the three pillars of sustainable development. They also point to the deficiencies in international sustainable development governance since the World Summit on Sustainable Development. At the same time, discussions around international environmental governance have highlighted the fragmentation and relative weakness of the environmental pillar.

10. Proposals for strengthening the institutional framework for sustainable development have identified key functions that a strengthened framework should deliver in a balanced manner:

(a) Advocating for sustainable development and setting the agenda for the future, thus providing political guidance on filling gaps and addressing emerging challenges;

(b) Reviewing progress in the implementation of commitments, including in providing support for sustainable development in developing countries;

(c) Sharing experiences and lessons learned;

(d) Promoting the participation of civil society and facilitating partnerships;

(e) Strengthening the science-policy interface.

Questions on the institutional framework for sustainable development

11. The questions might include:

(a) How can a new intergovernmental body on sustainable development be supported in securing effective high-level political engagement and follow-up of the sustainable development agenda, including the outcomes of the Conference, such as sustainable development goals?

(b) How can institutions at the local, national and regional levels more effectively integrate the three dimensions of sustainable development?

(c) How can the strengthening of the United Nations Environment Programme, one of the expected outcomes to be agreed at the Conference, be implemented in a way that lives up to Member States' expectations for a more effective environmental pillar?

(d) How can the institutional framework best enable the participation of civil society?

V. Financial resources, technology and capacity-building

12. Financing the critical investments in infrastructure and new production methods and capacities is an important challenge faced by developing countries aiming to build or transition to green economies on the path to sustainable development. Mobilizing a combination of domestic and international, public and private resources will be necessary for needed investments to eradicate poverty and achieve social and economic development that also yields environmental benefits. A policy environment that encourages a shift towards more efficient and environmentally sound production, transport and distribution systems will be crucial in this regard, as will continued financial support to developing countries from the international community and international financial institutions, particularly for the least developed countries.

13. Progress in science and technology and their application is essential for advancing towards sustainable development. Technology has greatly shaped society and the environment. It has addressed many problems but also added new ones. In order to plan for an effective implementation of the outcome of the Conference, it is important to recognize the potential contributions of science and technology, including through strengthened international collaboration in technology transfer and dissemination.

14. Technological innovation will need to be accelerated in coming years if we are to address effectively the sustainable development challenges facing the international community and national Governments. Technology will be only part of the response to such challenges, but without innovation, an effective response seems highly implausible. In principle, it should be technically feasible to increase global efficiency in the use of energy and materials several-fold by mid-century, but this will require major changes in policies, institutions and incentives.

15. The encouraging news is that technological innovation is happening in more and more countries, including developing countries. Thus, alongside enhanced North-South technological cooperation, strengthened South-South and triangular

cooperation will become increasingly important in technological cooperation for sustainable development.

16. Gaining affordable access to environmentally sound technologies while ensuring the protection of intellectual property rights is only part of the challenge facing developing countries aiming to build green economies on the path to sustainable development. Capacity limitations continue to hamper the efforts of developing countries, in particular, to achieve a more effective integration of the three pillars of sustainable development. In this regard, capacity-building efforts and mechanisms will need to remove existing constraints, whether in the areas of policy design and implementation, institutional effectiveness, technology deployment, development, transfer and management of infrastructure and productive capacity, or financial resource mobilization and utilization. The follow-up to the Conference provides a golden opportunity for the international community to strengthen, streamline and render more effective capacity-building support to developing countries, particularly the least developed countries, in the pursuit of sustainable development and the attainment of sustainable development goals.

Questions on technology cooperation and other means of implementation

17. The questions might include:

(a) What new approaches can we deploy to mobilize and direct the financial resources, including official development assistance, that countries will need to invest in green economy policies and move more decisively towards sustainable development?

(b) How can we ensure that efforts in the fields of science and technology result in a significant increase in global energy and resource efficiency in the coming decades?

(c) How can we foster broad access to environmentally sound technologies, including in developing countries and the least developed countries?

(d) How can we enhance international technological cooperation on the development, deployment and transfer of environmentally sound technologies, including in developing countries?

(e) What can be done by the international community to strengthen and target more effectively its capacity-building support for building inclusive green economies and achieving sustainable development and poverty eradication?